

Volunteer Voices

March 1, 2008
Volume 2, Number 1



Serving a network of over 1300 volunteers in South Carolina!

Welcome to the third issue of Volunteer Voices! We hope you enjoy this month's stories. This issue includes contributions from Lexington, Florence, Oconee, and Pickens counties. Thanks to all those who chose to share with us this month. In order to help protect the confidentiality of the children we serve, when your stories directly involve children, we will not print the last names of the volunteers. In addition, the details identifying the children have been changed. We know that you all appreciate how important it is to safeguard the situations and identities of these children, and want this to be a safe way for you to share the feelings you have about being a volunteer Guardian ad Litem.

Enclosed with your newsletter this month you will find a survey about the South Carolina Volunteer Guardian ad Litem Program. We are conducting this survey as part of our accountability measures. We would like to know how you as a volunteer feel about the program, in what areas we are doing well, and what do we need to improve. The survey asks for your name and county so that we can verify that you are a volunteer, but the survey results will not include your identifying information. Please be as candid as possible, so that we can learn from the results and make positive changes to the program and better serve children. The survey can be mailed or faxed to the State Office, or completed online. To do the online version, go to <http://www.oepp.sc.gov/gal/> and click on the link for Volunteer GAL Program Survey. Your responses must be received by April 1, 2008. Thank you for helping us with this important project.

Thanks to Michael Lee for the cartoon illustration this month. Michael is a survivor of child abuse, and donates his work free of charge to organizations that work with abused children. You can visit his web site: KidsOnFirst.com

The photographs in this issue are illustrations only, and do not depict any children represented by the GAL program.

This newsletter funded by a grant from National CASA.
www.nationalcasa.org

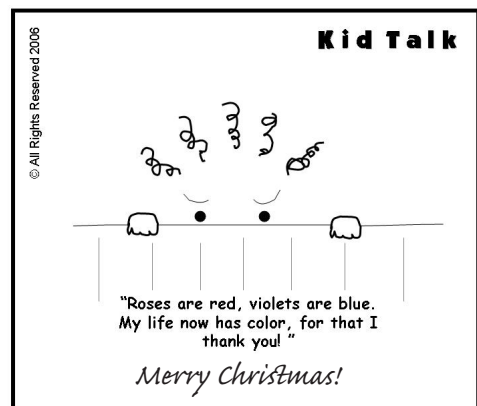
"My name is Dottie O. and I've been a volunteer Guardian ad Litem (GAL) in for two years."

I work full time as a Real Estate Broker, have a wonderful husband and four children with full and challenging lives. Life is at it's best, so I thought.

The Lord started to burden my heart about four years ago about giving back in life. I knew that whatever I was going to volunteer at it would have to do with neglected or abused children. God allowed an unfortunate childhood experience to give me the intuition and special burden to try and be a "voice" for children who would otherwise fall through the cracks of the system. My first two cases involved six children who desperately needed someone to "be their voice."

Making a difference in children's lives by being a GAL volunteer is the hardest yet most rewarding work I have ever had the privilege to do. Our rewards come in simple things like a homemade Christmas card from a child that says, "Thank you Mrs. Dottie for all help, We Love You!" What a payday for a volunteer!

Dottie O, Volunteer Guardian ad Litem



Created by Michael Lee

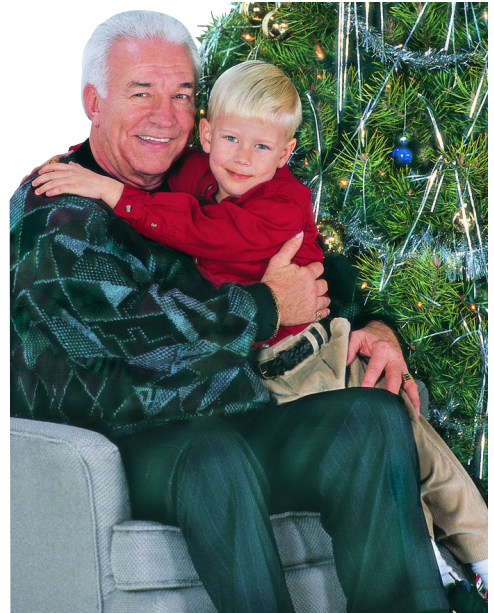
GAL Helps a Special Christmas Wish Come True

I first learned about the Guardian ad Litem program from an article in the newspaper. After hearing about the requirements like attending court, I did not think I was qualified. I was just a stay-at-home mom with two teenagers and no education in social services, so how could I do this type of work? So I did nothing. Then about a year later I read a very sad article about an abused child and I decided that I wanted to do something to help. I signed up for the training and it is the best decision I could have made.

Once a case has started my favorite part is the monthly visits with the children. I love getting to know them and I do this in different ways. I bring games or toys or read books to them or watch their favorite TV show or just talk. I visit them wherever they go so I get to know about their daily life. Younger children love to show you off at school because they feel special that someone is there just for them.

I have been a Guardian ad Litem for a 10 year old child for three years. He has been in six different foster placements during this time and he had one wish for this past Christmas and that was to spend Christmas with some of his family. I told him I would see what I could do. So several weeks prior to Christmas I started to pursue this possibility with DSS, lawyers and his foster home. After many phone calls, meetings and correspondence it was six days before Christmas and we finally received the authorization to let him have a two-night visit starting on Christmas Eve. Needless to say, he was thrilled when he was told! He couldn't wait to see the bedroom that was waiting for him with a special surprise and to see all his family that he hasn't seen in years and to just be in a "real home" again.

So imagine my shock when I received a message from DSS saying that they were sorry but the visit was NOT going to be allowed. This is now three days before Christmas Eve and all I could think of was how was I going to tell this child that he would not be going home for Christmas. I did not want to tell him because I was afraid of what that news would do to him. It would have been different if he was told "no" in the beginning, but to have been told "yes, you can go home for Christmas" and now "no, you cannot." That would have devastated him! So I called the coordinator in the Guardian office and she agreed that this would be a terrible thing to do to a child.



We had an emergency meeting with DSS and convinced them that changing their minds after they had already told him yes would not be in his best interests. So a compromise was agreed upon and in the end he did get to go home for a Christmas visit.

He had a wonderful time with his family and even though it was a short visit it was better than none at all. This is what the Guardian ad Litem program is all about doing "what is in the best interests of a child" and for this child it was keeping a promise to him.

I really enjoy working as a Guardian ad Litem and I am glad I made the decision to do this. I found out that I am qualified to do this work simply because I love children and I want to help. There is no better feeling in the world when a case closes and you know that you played a part in a happy ending for a child.

Margaret K.

TOP 10 REASONS TO BE A VOLUNTEER GAL!

10. You **GIVE HOPE** to children by helping them find safety and love in permanent homes.
9. You are a positive and **EFFECTIVE ADVOCATE** for a child
8. You have **GREAT SUPPORT STAFF** available to help you.
7. You will learn how to **MAKE a DIFFERENCE** in a child's life.
6. You can **TAKE ACTION** against child abuse.
5. You can **MEET OTHER VOLUNTEERS** with similar interests.
4. You encourage and **EMPOWER CHILDREN** to thrive and grow.
3. You spend **TIME WITH a Child**: it keeps you young!
2. **It's fun!**

#1.

(& best of all)
The pay is
wonderful:

A CHILD'S SMILE!!



This is available as a small poster to our volunteers. If you would like to have one, please contact me at:
cwalker@oepp.sc.gov or GAL Public Relations, PO Box 414, Pickens, SC 29671

A Great History.

We are a part of a great history. When Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence in June 1776, he and the other members of the Committee of Five not only penned a case for independence, they also sent forth a charge to the colonists of the "united States of America." That charge declared that it was the right and, consequently, the duty of those who were able to defend those who could not defend themselves to do so. And those founding fathers etched their pledge deeply into that parchment.

Two hundred years later, a new guard rose to the charge set forth in 1776 and stood capable and ready to defend and act. Volunteer Guardians ad Litem heard the call of the town crier of so many years ago and in 1977, found a path to protecting the most valuable national treasure of these United States of America: its children. A call was sent out and in its reverberating echo a caring voice rang forth. It simply said, "I will be there." And so the Guardians have done just that.

In the thirty years since the inception of the volunteer Guardian ad Litem program, Guardians have etched their pledges many times over with a clear determination: we did not create the past from whence grow the children for whom we are Guardians, but like our founding fathers, we can change the future. We can wipe away lonely tears. We can provide consistency amidst confusion. We can sit beside them and walk beside them. In times when all else has failed them, Guardians can, and will stand in the storm and dare the contrary winds to blow toward our children. If you want to see ferocity and courage that will stand down the contrary winds, cast your eyes to a Guardian. A Guardian will not back down from a fight because the fight is worth it: it is priceless.

Have no doubt, despite my own pride in the history in which I have been just a modest part, many times I reflect that I could have done better.

But as Guardians we must always remember that what matters more is that we did something. We answered the call of our founding fathers and did something because something needed to be done. And like our founding fathers, we learned something along the pathway: we learned about the children, we learned about the parents and we learned about ourselves. And we learned what voices proclaiming as one and hands toiling in unison can accomplish.

Do not mistake the elevation of Guardians to such gloried esteem as anything other than encouragement. There are many others that defend and act for our precious children. But, occasionally, we need to remember that being a Guardian is a tough job and tough jobs can exact their toll. Yet, when you compare the dedication of 50,000 advocates who have served over 1,000,000 children – 1,300 advocates are from my home state of South Carolina and are currently serving 5,000 children – with the exasperation we sometimes feel, the tipping of the scales is clear. Our dedication is immeasurable. Still, we all feel discouraged now and then.

It is in conclusion that I profess that through all of the lessons, some harsh, some not, even when we feel like we could have done better, we, as Guardians ad Litem, should remember that we are a part of a rich and honorable history. Not everyone can be a Guardian. It requires talent, energy, compassion, diligence, perseverance and determination. After every case we close, the lesson that we should all learn is that we are a part of a great history of which we can be proud and of which we should be proud. We held fast to our duty and acted. We acted as our founding fathers decreed we should act. Something was needed and something was done. What a legacy for history to record.

Douglas Stewart Cooner

Sources: National Archives and Records Administration, South Carolina Volunteer Guardian ad Litem, National Court Appointed Special Advocates Association

Understanding Hope.

My name is Susan R. I've been a volunteer GAL for 3 years.

And in just that short time, I have been able to make a difference in the lives of 16 children, including a newborn and two teenagers. Each child I advocate for has either been neglected or abused by the very people they have trusted to protect, love, and care for them.

Most of the children I have worked with have had to be moved from their homes to a safer place. While foster homes do provide safety, it is a tremendous change for the children to leave all they have ever known and move into a strange, new place. I can't even imagine all that the child must leave behind and cope with in their new, temporary refuge.

Sometimes parents will work hard to get their lives together so they can provide a better life for their children. But all too often parents are unable to give up an addiction or make the changes necessary to get custody of their child back. How do you tell a child that their parent would rather drink or use drugs than take care of him? How can a child not help but feel abandoned and betrayed by their own flesh and blood?

My heart overflows with compassion and love for these children in crises.

They need someone who will listen and try to understand their feelings and their frustrations and their fears. They need someone who will set aside time to wholeheartedly look out for their best interests.

They need someone who will look at all the aspects of the situation and develop a plan to help parents become more functional and able to care for him. I may not be able to fix the situation, but I sure can become involved in the life of a child and provide him with the support and stability he need as he goes through this incredibly difficult time.

And while I know that these children need me, I also see how much I need these children. For through these children I find purpose, discover more about myself, and connect with humanity. These needy children provide me with the opportunity to live a more fulfilling life. Until I saw the gratefulness of a child who had lost everything, I didn't know how much I had. I didn't fully understand hope til I was able to come alongside a child in a hopeless situation.

And I didn't know what love really was until an abused child, never having been shown love, shyly hugged me and whispered that she loved me.

Susan R.



A Very Rewarding Journey

In October 1988, I signed up for a training class to become a Guardian ad Litem. Little did I know at that time, what a rewarding journey this would be.

Of course, I had some concerns at first. What if I became too attached to the child/children? I soon learned that when a GAL is assigned a case - the child/children have already been removed from harm and are in a safe place or the abuser has been removed from the home. The GAL is now the voice of the child/children. The only concern of the GAL is what is best for "this Child/Children", period. The relationship between GAL and the children in each case is much different than a foster parent would be. It is better. I have always received hugs & kisses from "My Children" over the years. The children have always been so happy to see me, whether it be in foster care placement or sometimes if they got to return home. I have always told them, age appropriate, that I want what is best for them. Sometimes being able to return home will not be the answer in the end. Unfortunately, the children do suffer the most in all removal cases, and have done nothing to make it happen.

Personally, I have never been concerned about my safety as a volunteer. You must remember this, a GAL works with DSS, but we are not a part of DSS. Our position in every case we accept is what is best for the child/children. I have always made this clear, from the start, to the families involved and believe me, they are eager to tell their side of the story.

The training that I received 19+ years ago would prepare anyone for anything. During the training, everything is covered, all questions are answered. No GAL goes to Court unprepared. By the time training is over and you accept your first case, you are more than ready. There is also such a wonderful support system in place at the GAL offices for any questions, any time. Even after the training, you are not obligated to take a case if you do not feel comfortable doing so. Remember, it is a volunteer program. This is something that you want to do, not have to do. It is all about making a difference in the lives of innocent little children.

Over the years, I have had people say to me concerning becoming a GAL, "Well, I don't have time to do this, I'm just too busy" and my answer to them is ~ "These children are the future, what better sacrifice of your time?"

I have been an advocate for approximately 54 children over the last 19 years. Fortunately, some of the children did get to return home and some didn't and have been adopted. There are so, so many rewarding stories. There was one case that lasted over 8 years, with 5 different caseworkers. As GAL, I was the only constant, which was a good thing, as I would have to update the case to each new worker. Seven of my "children" have been adopted and are thriving in their new lives. One little girl that was in a foster home placement for over a year, would shout and jump up and down with excitement when I would go to visit her "Look, My Guardian Angel is here to see me". Tell me, what could be more rewarding than that?

Presently, I have three active cases that include a total of nine children. I have worked a full time job for the last 19 years and managed to do the GAL volunteer work.

The bottom line is that this program is all about making a difference in the life of a child and breaking the cycle of abuse. This is a volunteer position and the rewards are everlasting.

Marilyn M.

Knocking On My Heart's Door

Thank you for the newsletter on Volunteer Voices! I saw your note about "Top 10 Reasons to be a Volunteer GAL" and somehow this article caught my attention!

I didn't choose to be a Volunteer GAL! I was chosen by a Higher Power, while smack in the middle of a medical crisis that resulted in major surgery. I was trying my best to recuperate and was resting and reading the local newspaper. I could not enjoy the articles in this paper because my eyes and heart kept returning to the caption which said: "Needed: Volunteer Guardians ad Litem". I tried my best to disregard the message that was knocking on my heart's door.

Then I remembered that many years ago, the same thing happened to me another time. The previous caption I read in past years stated, "Foster parents needed in Pickens County". I realized that was also a time when I was forced to slow my pace and somehow hear a message of the heart. We became foster parents for 9 years and adopted one of our foster children; which I truly believe was God's plan for our life's pathway. He was placed in our care when he was 11 months old! He belonged in our home and he belonged to us. Adoption was not on our list of goals, but God had other plans. We knew without being told what we should do.

So I was well acquainted with the system, but still did not know about being a GAL! I agreed to go through the training but didn't really know what I planned to do

with the training! I was not recuperated from my surgery and had to constantly chew gum to keep my gastric juices flowing during the training. The coordinator instructed us that we must NOT chew gum in the court room. I was so embarrassed and I didn't want to tell her "why" I had to chew the gum! (due to the recent surgery).

I have been blessed in being a GAL! I had one case that I was not willing to give up on. I meant to hang in till the bitter end. Well, it was not a bitter end but a joyful end. I am thankful!

I have always had the support of other GAL's and the support of my local program. We're all a team! I truly don't know what motivates me, except to be able to see a little child bonding with their caregivers and to see the love that is being shared in the home. It is in knowing "I've made the right choice". It's when my eyes can see and my heart can feel that there's been a difference!"

This strengthens me! I'm able to recognize that special affection right away, because I've been there and done that! I'm also able to recognize safety issues and when something ain't right. I recognize when caregivers go above and beyond the call of duty. I've been frustrated when I couldn't seem to make a difference. I've been challenged. God has enlarged my heart and I've met so many wonderful people who truly care and want to help make a difference! In the GAL's I know, we have a connection in the heart that speaks louder than words!

To my coordinator, I want to say "Thank you" for your sweet voice that somehow reached deep into my heart on the day I called the Guardian office for a little information. Well, I got a little (whole packet) of information and have been getting it ever since! I'll never forget you.

Love, Frances Y.



ASKGAL is your chance as volunteers to ask questions of state office staff. We won't be able to publish answers that are case specific, but are looking for more general questions or concerns you may have. Think of this as our version of Dear Abby! Please email your questions to: askgal@oepp.sc.gov

Dear ASKGAL:

I read in the last issue of Volunteer Voices about the Friends Group in York County that had ID badges created for their volunteers. Will there be ID badges issued for all volunteers in the future? This would really be a big help as security issues get to be more of a concern for the places where our children are located. Sincerely, Badgeless Volunteer

Dear Badgeless,

We do feel strongly that ID badges will be helpful to you in your work as volunteer GAL's. We are working on a system to create picture ID's for all volunteers. One county has already been completed as a pilot project. However, to create badges on a large scale for over 1300 volunteers will involve purchasing some new equipment. As soon as funding becomes available, we will proceed as quickly as possible.

- AskGAL

\$5727 Awarded to Florence County Friends Group.

The Florence County Volunteer Guardian ad Litem Program received a \$5727 grant from the Bi-Lo Charity Classic in November, 2007. As a member of the Friends of the Florence County GAL Program, I was very excited to hear we had been awarded this grant. This is the second year we have received this award.

I also serve as a volunteer Guardian ad Litem, and I have seen first hand the difference that a volunteer can make for an abused child. Our county does not have enough volunteers to take all the cases, so many children do not receive the special touch that a volunteer brings to a case. One of the purposes of the grant is to assist our recruiting efforts. It is the goal of the Florence County Program to provide volunteers for all the children who need one, and as the Friends Group we work to support that mission. While the children who are living in foster care have many different needs, the most important thing we can provide for them is a voice in the system.

I am proud of the hard work the Friends group has done in securing this grant. I think it is wonderful that the Bi-Lo Charity Classic chose to recognize the hard work that all our volunteers do on behalf of abused children. Being part of the Friends group allows us to not only help those children we serve as volunteers, but to extend our efforts to serve all abused children in Florence County. I hope that this will inspire other volunteers to reach out and think big! Nothing is impossible for a determined group with a goal.

Sharon Smith, Florence County Volunteer GAL.

Send us your story! We are looking for all types of stories about your experiences: a problem you overcame, something special you advocated for a child, or anything you've learned that could be helpful to other volunteers. You can submit your stories in writing or by email. And, if you want to share but don't want to write, please call me and I'll interview you on the phone. Please submit all stories to: Cherie Walker, Box 414, Pickens, SC 29671 email to: cwalker@oepp.sc.gov or call (864) 878-0807.